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Industrial Liberty in Wartime

ADDRESS OF THE

Hon. Newton D. Baker

SECRETARY OF WAR

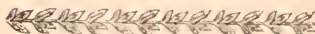
AT THE

Eighteenth Annual Meeting

OF THE

NATIONAL CONSUMERS' LEAGUE

BALTIMORE, NOVEMBER 14, 1917





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The Rôle of Volunteer Associations Under Our Form of Government

We have a curious form of government, not only in the fact that it is a departure from the political traditions of mankind everywhere, but because it involves, I think, more than any other government in the world a co-operation of the volunteer spirit.

People are wont to say in America that whenever a grievance arises it is discussed, an organization is formed, its officers get together and appoint a committee and then it is all over. In a sense that is so. We do multiply committees. We get up societies and associations and leagues until we are sometimes weighted down with the multifariousness of our diverse occupations and interests, and are disposed to question whether or not many of them may not be futile. Yet I make bold to say that if we were to withdraw from the effective government of the United States the voluntary effort which is represented by such associations, our government would scarcely exist at all.

There are governments which take into their keeping all of the interests and all of the life of their people. They make a calendar by which their people live. They have the trusteeship and custodianship of the intellectual and of the spiritual life of their people. They are what might be called, if we were to borrow the language of modern industry, completely integrated governments, and from the cradle to the grave the citizen is merely playing an assigned part in the life of the state, which is higher than the citizen, and for which and for the glory of which the citizen is made.

Ours is an entirely different policy, an entirely different theory of government. We are very jealous about institutionalizing our government. We are loath to make laws. I realize that the vast volumes of published laws which come from Congress and the state legislatures every year seem enormous, but most of these laws are to change people's names or do other immaterial things. The actual body of fresh institutional law passed in any one year in the United States is exceedingly small, and fundamental changes are

made slowly, with reluctance. We are exceedingly loath to take away from the individual or from groups of individuals any part of the powers or rights or privileges or liberties which at one time they enjoyed, no matter how inconsistent they may have become with a more advanced state of our industrial civilization.

For a supplement to this institutionalizing of our life we rely upon voluntary effort, upon leagues and associations and committees and groups. Their function with us is a pioneering function. They take up the slack of our life; between complete autocracy of government and an almost as complete neglect by government of many of the interests of life, the voluntary associations perform their function. They discover the undiscovered country; they keep track of the development of things, and they agitate for remedies; they supply remedies.

I do not want to pursue the speculative suggestion too far, because it is not necessary to justify the existence of the Consumers' League or of any kindred organization. What we actually do is to go out into the life of America and find those things which are costing us more than we can afford to lose, things which cannot be counted in dollars and cents, which are just over the horizon of the legislature's eye, things which the legislative body has not yet apprehended, as it were. We get those deadly costs and drag them into light and place them within the horizon of the legislature, so that after awhile what has been discovered by some such society as ours as a neglected social duty comes to be recognized as an unescapable social obligation.

I cannot stop to illustrate what the Consumers' League has given to the people of the United States, but if you will run over in your mind such organizations as our League or the Child Labor Committee or the Civil Service Reform League and mentally take off the statute books of the country the things which have been put there through such voluntary effort, or take out of our public life and consciousness the recognitions which we have been forced to make through the education which has come from such societies, you will realize, I think, that organizations like these are, as it were, the forerunners of government. They are an essential part of the

American theory of government, of the American government; they are as essential as are the more formalized parts of it, which appear in persons who hold public office, or in laws which appear written down in cold words upon the statute books.

The New Need of Preserving Human Power

The importance of that speculation to me is this: Our country is, of course, in the most serious situation it has ever been in our history, serious not only because we are engaged in a great war, for, terrible as wars are and terrible as this war is, we have had trying times in this country before, and have been engaged in wars when the right seemed to hang at a very delicate balance; there were many periods of time when it seemed as though the right might perhaps not prevail.

We are in a serious condition because this war is the first war in history since modern industrialism came into existence. It is the first war in the world on the large scale and among highly civilized peoples since transportation became so large a factor in life. It is the first war of any large proportion since the recent and very great advances of science have been made, and, therefore, it is the most deadly war. I do not mean in the actual number of killed, but I mean in the destructive effect upon the human elements engaged in it, it is surely the most deadly war that we have ever had.

It is the first war in which such enormous masses of men have been engaged. On the other side of the ocean the entire man-power of the nations is mobilized, until all fields of life have had men drafted away from them. From all the callings, from agriculture, the most necessary, men have been taken away and have been converted for the time being into men of war, and tremendous problems have resulted from it.

Only one or two of those problems can be considered by us at this time. The United States has gone into this war. Inevitably, the taking of a million or a million and a half or two million, or any other large number of men out of the industrial and commercial life of our nation is going to make itself felt. There will be less men in the workshops. There

will be less men in the professions. There will be fewer men in the colleges, both as students and as teachers. There will be fewer men in agriculture and in many of the industries which we have regarded as vital. As yet, the draft is relatively small; as the war progresses, it is going to be increasingly large, and as the draft increases, the need for an industrial output grows correspondingly greater.

Those nations with whom we are allied in this conflict are getting further and further away from their former productive eras. Their workshops and factories are being filled by boys and women who have learned to do only one element of what was originally a craft or a trade. The all-around craftsmen, the journeymen working in industry, are becoming fewer and fewer in every one of those countries, while on the other hand their natural resources are necessarily much diminished and constantly decreasing. This throws back upon us as the freshest, most unexhausted and I hope, in a proper sense, the least exhaustible of all the countries arrayed on our side, an increasing burden to feed and supply the world.

Now, unfortunately, machinery has given us one great delusion. People have imagined that when a machine was operated by a steam engine or by an electric motor, the steam engine or the electric motor actually did all the work and the people who were attending it while it operated were more or less negligible. As a consequence, we indulged ourselves in the very unfortunate and often fatal belief that unlimited hours of labor were possible because it was the machines which were doing the work. And now with this pressure upon us from all over the world for an increased supply of food and industrial materials of all kinds, the great temptation is to hug that delusion to our hearts and demand of our men and women and children in industry that they give us longer hours of work. We overlook the fact, which we have lately begun to appreciate, that the person who tends the power-driven machine is far more susceptible to exhaustion, is far more open to fatigue and to the poisons that affect the system and that come from over-exertion than ever before.

We are likely to overlook that truth. Yet if we did overlook it, we should have, in addition to the terrible cost of the

loss of life involved in battle, an equally terrible though far less spectacular cost at home in the devitalized life of the men and women and children in industry upon whom, as a foundation, the whole social, industrial and military structure of the country must rest.

The Preservation of Industrial Standards

Now, because of our realization of these things the call comes to the Consumers' League—as one of these semi-governmental institutions, as one of these silent partners in the government—that if it ever was busy it shall now redouble its busi-ness; that if it ever had a call to point out to the American people the drain on life from industrialism and long hours of labor and insanitary housing and the like, that call is now raised to the nth power. For this is the moment when the imagination of the American people is most likely to fail on that subject. They are most likely to demand goods in increasing quantities and not to stop to ask the cost of them.

We are taking out of industrial life a million and a half of men now. A very much larger number of women are being employed in our industries. I have no doubt that the inspectors who are charged with the duty of enforcing State child labor laws are having more and more insistent demands from employers that they relax their vigilance in the interest of the national output. I have not the least doubt, as a matter of fact I have some very definite knowledge that employers who have contracts with the government or with the allies, or who make things more or less necessary to the life of the people, are constantly saying to themselves and to State enforcing agencies and to me as Secretary of War and as a member of the Council of National Defense: "This is not the time to worry about those restrictions; this is not the time to enforce these laws about children and women and their hours and condition of labor; too large and momentous events are moving now for anybody to stop with these things." That demand is being made everywhere. Now, the duty of the Consumers' League and of every

member of it, and of everybody who knows its philosophy and believes in it, is to set his face resolutely against everything that on any pretext seeks to break down those barriers which we have set up through years of patient labor against the enervation and dissipation of the child-life and of the woman-life and of the man-life of this country.

I think the Council of National Defense has not done very much in the direction of relaxation. I am aware of the fact that we have sometimes done some things in the way of relaxation. I think it is safe to say, however, that the government has rather advanced the standards demanded in industry since the war began than relaxed them. I feel perfectly certain as to nine-tenths of the work done for the Federal Government since we went into this war that the conditions of hours, of pay, of sanitation and supervision under which the work is done,—as to nine-tenths of the work it is better than it would have been under conditions existing prior to our entrance into the war. But I say this not to claim credit. I say it because to that extent the government has recognized this most solemn of all facts, that it will do us no good whatever to send our sons to France to fight for our political rights if while they are waging the battle we surrender our industrial and our social rights here at home.

The Preservation of Industrial Liberty

We are gradually learning, I think, that liberty is of a piece with all of its qualities; all of which we must require if we are to enjoy any of them. I have the right to go to Florida and spend the winter. It does me no good. I have not the time and I have not the money, so that my one-cornered liberty is an ideal possession and is enjoyed only when I have the leisure to indulge in imaginary pleasure. And so it is about political liberties. It does us no good to be able to vote for people; it does us no good to be able to call ourselves free and to describe our land as the land of the free unless we have all the component parts of real freedom. And that means the political liberty to recast our industrial life so that it will really be a life of opportunity to the least person who lives under it.

Now, our sons are going to France—many of them to stay—many of them to return, and when they come back they will see the Statue of Liberty. They will sail into New York harbor proud of their victories, proud of their honors. And I am filled with an exalted state of enthusiasm about the kind of armies we are sending to France. It is just such an army as a free people ought to send, an army that has ideals in its individuals as well as in its collective mass, an army that is going upon no selfish quest, is not seeking to take something from somebody, is divorced from all ancient notions that used to bring about wars of prestige or of conquest. It is going upon a purely idealistic basis. In a certain sense they are material warriors in a spiritual warfare; and when they have finally done the thing which they must do, when they have finally established on the frontiers of France the eternal dominance of free over autocratic institutions, when they have done that, they will come home. And when they come I want them to find not a dissipated and depressed life here. I do not want them to find that they have been chasing one corner of freedom while the others have been utterly lost; but I want them to come back to wives and sisters and mothers and brothers and children filled with robust health, people who have worked in industry and commerce, people who have produced the goods upon which life depends, people who have filled the workshops and the factories and the fields with labor, done under wholesome conditions. Let them find that, as they were fighting at one end of the frontier and winning one corner of freedom's fields, we at home were enlarging the boundaries of industrial liberty, that we were laying out new boundaries of real freedom here among ourselves, that we were enlarging the lessons we had hitherto learned of the value, the indispensableness of wholesome conditions for people who do the labor of the world, and establishing conditions which it will be a privilege for them to come back to rather than a grief.

New Gains in Industry: No Sweatshop Labor

It is the special function of the Consumers' League to continue its work along that line. If I can drop my character as President of the League for a moment, I can thank the

League for the help it has already given. I have, as most of you know, borrowed the General Secretary of the Consumers' League. She will tell you, and I have not the slightest objection to its being told, that in one particular branch of work about which she happens to know, the privates' uniforms of the Army of the United States are not being made in sweatshops; not one of them is being made in sweatshops. Under arrangements which have been made for the manufacture of the clothing of the army, it is now substantially all being made under sanitary conditions, not in the homes of people who have to live in congested places; under suitable restrictions as to hours of labor and under proper wage scales, so that for once at least the Government of the United States assumes the character of a model employer in a vital industry.

That it was possible to find the enlightenment to bring about this result is one of the glories of the Consumers' League. An enormous gain has been made here at home, a victory has been won here at home, one that will not appear in the newspapers as a victory at arms will, and yet a real victory for better conditions.

You have the opportunity as you scatter throughout the various States of this Union to raise your voices against a relaxation of the standards which you have so largely achieved. You have an opportunity to be explicit in teaching and impressing the lesson that we cannot afford when we are losing boys in France to lose children in the United States at the same time; that we cannot afford when this nation is having a drain upon the life of its young manhood, which is not learning the crafts by which the industrial and agricultural life of the nation is hereafter to be sustained—we cannot afford to have the life of women workers of the United States depressed. If the Consumers' League and its affiliated and kindred organizations will stand on that and preach it constantly, in season and out of season, then truly while some of the direct losses of this war are irremediable, there will nevertheless be some by-products from it which will count for social gains among us. After the wastage of the war has really come to an end, there will be a solid foundation of ground gained here at home upon which further social advance and reconstruction can proceed.

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